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SUBJECT: Mongolia's Southwest Part 2 of 3: Gobi Altai: Vast,
Struggling MPRP Stronghold

Ref: Ulaanbaatar 0180

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: During the Charge's April 21-23 visit to Gobi Altai province, Vice Governor Erdenbat said the province's future hopes include food processing, especially canned beef for Russia, light industry (once the nearby hydropower plant comes online this summer), tourism, and mining. On mining, he said the province had "left its wealth in the ground," awaiting better transportation networks and environmentally and community friendly mine operators. USAID's Gobi Initiative (GI) project is active promoting job creation through small and medium enterprise development. The GI project is well known and well regarded by locals, government officials, and the media. Visits to some projects revealed GI is registering good progress. Predictably, several interlocutors asked when Peace Corps Volunteers would return to the province. The province has consistently voted for candidates of the ruling Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), and local MPRP reps are under pressure from their headquarters to deliver the province again. Democratic Party reps hope to increase their seat total in the provincial parliament and complained about MPRP tendencies to give contracts and jobs to party faithful and family members. A children's NGO rep catalogued a litany of problems facing children, stemming from poverty and the dearth of after-school activities and facilities. TIP and HIV/AIDS are not yet problems in the province, and preventive/education efforts are underway. Elder and children NGO reps both expressed interest in U.S. GSP handicrafts opportunities. END SUMMARY.

ALTAI ITINERARY

12. (U) The Charge, accompanied by E/P Political Specialist doubling as interpreter and driver, visited Altai, the capital of Gobi Altai aimag (province) April 21-23, on the second of three stops. He met with Altai government and political party officials, local medical-college teachers and students, toured three USAID-funded Gobi Initiative development projects, met with local press, and visited a Buddhist temple. This cable, the second of three (reftel

reports on his Zavkhan visit; Bayanhongor septel to follow), provides a snapshot of the Charge's brief visit to Altai.

GOVERNOR PROMOTES HERDING AND LIGHT INDUSTRY

13. (SBU) Vice Governor Erdenbat said Gobi Altai is Mongolia's second largest province, with 141,000 square kilometers. The province is home to 59,000 residents, of which nearly 19,000 live in Altai, the capital. VG Erdenbat said the province has nearly 2.5 million cattle; livestock is its primary industry and largest employer. He promoted the food-processing industry as one of the province's goals, including development of a canning factory to export beef to Russia. A nearby hydro-electric plant is scheduled to come on stream mid-summer, giving the province and capital electricity 24 hours a day, compared to periodic blackouts from its increasingly expensive diesel generator. He predicated the province would thereafter sport a growing capacity for small-scale light industry, in part to provide employment for the 1,000 job seekers out of the province's 5,000 unemployed persons. The VG said the province boasts substantial tourism potential, but admitted that infrastructure lagged, and that the province was off tourists' beaten path.

MPRP Stronghold Ordered to Deliver Again; Incumbents Favored Over Needed New Blood

14. (SBU) The nationally dominant Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), with 4,800 party members, holds 18 of the provincial parliament's 30 seats, as well as the chairman's seat and the Governorship. Gobi Altai has voted MPRP since its inception, and the MPRP's provincial leadership has been instructed to deliver

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again this year in the June 29 Parliamentary elections, the party's provincial chief said. The provincial MPRP council has identified three qualified candidates to run in those elections from Gobi Altai, but as Gobi Altai only has two seats in Parliament, one candidate will drop out. Voters tended to want candidates that can make major contributions to the province. The two incumbents have done well in this regard, have good name recognition and may be difficult to dislodge.

15. (SBU) However, the provincial MPRP chief said "new blood" is needed to invigorate the party. Local MPRP committees identified two highly qualified, up and coming MPRP candidates who could be selected by the national MPRP leadership to run from Gobi Altai: J. Enkhbayar, Chief of Staff of the State Supervisory and Inspection Agency, and Dashdorj, the Vice Minister for Construction and Urban Development. (Although the campaign season has yet to officially open, both Enkhbayar and Dashdorj happened to be visiting the province that week, engaging in activities that were aimed at boosting their popularity.) The Chief implied that "new blood" was needed to reinvigorate the party and for its future, but that the central MPRP committee would select the MPRP candidates that would run.

DP SANGUINE ABOUT PROSPECTS BUT HOPES FOR GAINS

16. (SBU) Democratic Party (DP) reps noted that the DP holds 12 of 30 provincial parliament seats, a number it hopes to improve on during autumn elections, but they expressed doubt that the DP would gain any seats in the national parliament. The DP claims 3,000 provincial members, but unofficially, they said, Gobi Altai might have 5,000 members. The DP reps complained that the MPRP did not listen to voters and that what investments had flowed into the province had largely benefited MPRP supporters or family members. Civil service jobs depended on MPRP party affiliation, they said, adding that some DP workers had succumbed to pressure to resign from the DP and join the MPRP in order to keep their jobs. The DP expected to field five to seven women candidates for the provincial assembly.

ELDERLY AND CHILDREN SUFFER FROM POVERTY

¶17. (SBU) Over lunch with NGO reps on April 22, an official of a senior citizens advocacy organization representing 7,800 elders said many found it difficult, if not impossible, to live on their monthly government subsidy of Tugruk 81,000 (about \$75), adding that about 495 lived in abject poverty. An official of a children's NGO said the province was home to 23,000 children under the age of 18 -- about 30% of the province's total population. She said the problems Gobi Altai's children face include poverty that leads to crime; most arrests stem from thefts of food by poor, hungry children. Disability also contributes to poverty, with some 700 disabled children requiring parental support at home, leading to reduced family incomes. Child labor, she said, is a modest problem, with some children serving as jockeys and others engaged in artisanal mining. Children's health problems stemmed from malnutrition, in particular vitamin deficiencies. Latch-key and other children who lacked parental supervision sometimes became delinquent and/or developed problems with alcohol. In general, the rep said, a dearth of after-school facilities and activities left children with no place to go and nothing to do but to get into trouble. She said there were a few incidents of sexual harassment of teenage girls by teenage boys, as well as some family-related problems. Trafficking in persons (TIP) was not yet a problem in the province, she said, and that NGOs had been proactive in preventive and educational efforts. The same was true of HIV/AIDS. Both the children's and senior citizens NGO reps expressed interest in the U.S. Generalized System of Preferences for handicrafts opportunities.

GOBI INITIATIVE SHOWING PROGRESS

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¶18. (U) Mercy Corps representatives provided an overview briefing of Gobi Initiative activities over the past four years, showing rising trends in all categories (individuals serviced, jobs created, sales, loans, etc.) Afterward, the Charge visited three client projects (a veterinarian, a cobbler, and a camel-milk processor), all registering good progress and profits.

NEW BUDDHIST TEMPLE DRAWS GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

¶19. (U) During a visit to the Dashpeljeelin Buddhist Temple, head monk Enkhjargal estimated his temple had a following of about 10,000 people (among the city's 19,000 residents), supported by seven lamas. He noted the province's leaders were strong supporters of the construction of a large temple complex incorporating the existing temple plus other facilities capable of accommodating 500-600 worshippers. (Indeed, the Vice Governor had hinted a donation would be welcomed, and the VG invited the Charge to a fundraiser dinner in May in Ulaanbaatar.) He opined that his temple was among Mongolia's poorest, and expressed gratitude for USG efforts at cataloguing Mongolia's Buddhist structures. He said his province had had nearly 1,000 lamas prior to the repression of the 1930's, but that all had been slain. He understood, from second-hand sources, that a handful of Christian worshippers gathered for services in a private home. He did not know of any Muslims in town.

MEDICAL COLLEGE DOMINATED BY WOMEN;
SCHOLARSHIP, LANGUAGE EXCHANGES, TEXTS NEEDED

¶10. (U) Altai Medical College teachers and English language students said males amounted to less than 25% of the school's 1,000 students. They inquired about scholarship opportunities as well as language exchanges via internet. The College suffered from a shortage of textbooks, as well as modern medical equipment on which to train.
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